

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: December 12, 2013

Agenda Item: Bridger Bighorn Sheep Transplant

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final Action

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

In 2012, FWP proposed to reintroduce bighorn sheep into the Bridger Mountains. After extensive evaluation of the environmental assessment, FWP selected Alternative C, a modified proposed action that included the release of bighorns contingent upon entering into voluntary domestic sheep management agreements with sheep producers to achieve separation between domestic and wild sheep. The comingling of domestic sheep and bighorns has resulted in disease-related bighorn sheep die-offs in Montana and throughout the west. Based on FWP's Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy (2010) and other management sources, the Bridgers are a high-risk area for disease transmission. The 2012 decision notice noted these mitigations must come through the cooperation of existing landowners and sheep owners in proximity to the reintroduction area, as well as through the cooperation of interests that support the reintroduction.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP had further correspondence with two local sheep producers and advocates of this project, but no group ever officially formed to bring the needed grassroots attention to the important issues of mitigations needed to prevent comingling. One sheep owner initially worked to create a meeting between the Montana Woolgrowers, other local sheep owners, sportsmen, and landowners, but such a meeting never occurred. Another local sheep owner was not in favor of this project, nor any mitigations needed to prevent comingling. A second local sheep owner was accepting of the project, but would not offer to change his operation in any way. A third was favorable for the project, but noted most mitigations would be impractical or unacceptable to their large and growing operation. Several other operators would entertain mitigations if funding were provided to them. A source of this funding was never identified. FWP toured the reintroduction site with a domestic sheep herd manager and with a representative of the Wild Sheep Foundation.

Alternatives and Analysis

At request of the F&W Commission, FWP created a list of known or probable mitigation strategies to prevent comingling of domestic and wild sheep (attached). This list was a product of efforts from several biologists on the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Association's Wild Sheep Working Group. The suggested mitigations were often expensive, and based on agency conversations, few domestic sheep owners were likely to entertain these.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends no reintroduction of bighorn sheep into the Bridger Mountains at this time. It is clear we will not have the necessary mitigations to have a reasonable expectation of success for this transplant. The risk of disease transmission from domestic sheep to wild sheep will remain high.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission adopt the final decision to not reintroduce bighorn sheep into the Bridger Mountains.